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FM AMEMBASSY AMMAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3479
INFO RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0181
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0150
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0268
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0054
RUEHML/AMEMBASSY MANILA 0113
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0286
RUCPDOG/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC

UNCLAS AMMAN 002600

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EEB/TPP/ABT, NEA/ELA, NEA/RA, DRL, G/TIP
STATE PASS TO USTR (SFRANCESKI, LKARESH)
COMMERCE FOR ITA/OTEXA MARIA D'ANDREA

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: Workers Strike at Mediterranean Resources Apparel Industry
in Ad-Dulayl QIZ Over Salary Deduction for Food

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Summary

1. (SBU) Approximately 1,080 foreign workers at the Emirati Mediterranean Resources Apparel Industry (MRAI) factory in Ad-Dulayl Qualifying Industrial Zone (QIZ) went on strike August 31. They have demanded the end of a JD 25 (\$35.31) monthly deduction for food from their base salary, which was a contractual agreement reached with workers in March 2007. After 200 employees returned to work, one was beaten by fellow co-workers for breaking the strike line and she filed a report with the police. No abuse by the police towards the workers has been confirmed. MRAI management reports that workers have continued to receive food and water, and all employees have possession of their passports, except for approximately 158 workers whose passports, visas, or residency permits are being renewed. Interlocutors in the Ministry of Labor, the Textile Union, MRAI management, and the Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi Embassies all deem the strike illegal. End Summary.

Main Demand: End of Food Deductions

2. (SBU) Mediterranean Resources Apparel Industry (MRAI) employs around 1,251 workers: 429 Sri Lankans, 262 Bangladeshis, 218 Indians, 105 Nepalese, 2 Pakistanis, 1 Filipino, and 234 Jordanians. Approximately 1,080 workers, led by Bangladeshi workers, went on strike on August 31, calling for the elimination of a JD 25 (\$35.31) per month food deduction from their base salary or repatriation to their home countries. Ministry of Labor (MOL) and MRAI management confirmed that MRAI previously deducted JD 36.5 (\$51.55) per month and agreed to reduce the amount to JD 25 (\$35.31) after workers conducted a similar strike in March 2007. The owner of the factory and the workers signed the new contractual agreement with the assistance of relevant embassies and MOL. NOTE: The current local labor law allows for such deductions to be made as long as workers enter into the contract knowingly. END NOTE.

3. (SBU) Ameer Hasan Abdel-Qader, General Manager of MRAI, told Econoff that when the workers first went on strike, he met with 20 leaders to see if a compromise could be reached. He offered a bonus of JD 5 (\$7.06) per month; approximately 200 Sri Lankan workers accepted it and returned to work. The others, he said, continued to demand full elimination of the deduction. On September 4, the Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan Ambassadors and the MOL attempted to broker a further reduction to JD 15 (\$21.19) per month. Abdel-Qader reported the Bangladeshi Embassy in Amman recently informed him that

the workers wrote in their native language that they would accept a JD 10 (\$14.12) deduction. Yousef Aziz Rahman, Labor Welfare Officer in the Bangladeshi Embassy in Amman, confirmed that the workers will agree to this deduction and Abdel-Qader indicated that the company would also agree, assuming it is truly the final demand. On this basis Rahman believed that the strike would soon come to an end.

Most Workers in Possession of their Passports

14. (SBU) Abdel-Qader asserted that all employees were in possession of their passports, except for 158 whose passports were with the company's Human Resources Department. Of those, 10 needed to renew their passports at their embassies, 80 needed to renew their work residency permits, 23 had resigned or finished their contracts shortly before the strike, and 45 had been transferred from another closed-down factory in July or August and needed work visas and residency permits. He denied the allegations in the National Labor Committee's (NLC) recent report that MRAI management has threatened deportation, saying that he would not be in favor of sending anyone home who wanted to work in his factory. He also said that workers are allowed to leave the industrial park, although they have been cautioned about their own safety in doing so. Based on his conversations with workers and the relevant parties, Bangladeshi diplomat Rahman also denied the allegations in the NLC report and stated that passports were not forcefully confiscated.

Fighting among Co-Workers

15. (SBU) Contrary to a September 3 article in The Daily Star Online, MOL and union contacts have stated that the police in no way

harmed or even clashed with workers. MOL contacts told Poloffs that Ministry officials asked to see all workers allegedly harmed by the police, but only one Bangladeshi came forward, and Sri Lankan workers interviewed by MOL said the injury (marks on his head and neck) came from intra-worker fights and not from the police. In addition, two Sri Lankan workers told MOL officials they were mildly beaten by co-workers but did not want to file a police report. Abdel-Qader noted that he knew of at least one case in which seven roommates of a Bengali female worker who had returned to work beat her because she broke the strike line. The worker, he said, filed a report with the police, and MRAI rented a special apartment in the supervisors' building for her. MOL also said that the police had offered protection to workers who wanted to return to work, but noted their limitations in guaranteeing safety in the dormitories.

Working Hours

16. (SBU) Abdel-Qader added that MRAI follows the compliance standards of its buyers with regards to an emergency policy for working hours during the July - October high season. Employees may voluntarily decide to work a maximum of 12 hours a day, including overtime, but he averred that no one is forced to do so. He said that in April 2008 during the low season, MRAI tried to institute a policy of a maximum 8 hour workday with no overtime, but workers became upset because they wanted overtime and to make extra money. Abdel-Qader also confirmed that overtime is paid on a monthly basis with the regular salary and that while there have been instances of two- to three-day delays due to bureaucratic processing, employees are generally paid on time.

Illegal Strike

17. (SBU) The MOL and the Textile Union, represented by the local union organizer, signed a joint statement that the strike is illegal on the grounds that there was a contractual agreement that was handled transparently between the factory and the workers. The statement also said that workers failed to give the 14-day prior notice required by local law.

18. (SBU) Abdel-Qader noted that he hoped a compromise could be reached shortly, saying that he wants both his customers and his workers to be satisfied. He welcomed the visit of any USG officials

to the MRAI factory.

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